

## *Baptism*

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22** The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. <sup>16</sup> John replied to them all, "I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." <sup>21</sup> When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

**Acts 8:14-17** When word reached the apostles in Jerusalem that Samaria had accepted God's word, they commissioned Peter and John to go to Samaria. <sup>15</sup> Peter and John went down to Samaria where they prayed that the new believers would receive the Holy Spirit. (<sup>16</sup> This was because the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) <sup>17</sup> So Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

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The book of Acts in the New Testament is the closest thing that we have to a historical account of the early days of the church - those first few years after Jesus was crucified. It doesn't make any claim to be strictly chronological, nor does it claim to be a complete history. But it is a source of important stories about those early days of those who followed the teachings of Jesus Christ. In chapters eight through eleven there's a collection stories about how the good news of the gospel began to spread to people who weren't Jews.

We're told in the creation stories that we're made in God's image. I think that we forget that much of the time – and when we do remember that claim from scripture, we usually find it difficult to see how we – or those around us – are made in God's image. But without giving it any thought at all, we're really very prone to making God in our image. We do this when we picture God the Father in human form, a gray bearded man sitting on a throne – or leaning out from a cloud to touch Adam's finger on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. We do this with Jesus, as well. He's usually clean shaven or perhaps has a very neat small beard, He's always freshly scrubbed, in clean flowing robes, and even his sandals and feet are clean. He looks more European than Semitic. The painting in the hallway is a classic example of portraying Jesus to look like us physically.

But we also tend to assume that God is like us emotionally – loving one group of people above all others, quick to judge and slow to forgive, handing out vengeance and punishment to those who deserve it, demanding groveling and begging before considering forgiving, giving gifts only to those who deserve them, and smacking those who are getting out of line. The early disciples tended to conceive of God in their own image and chapters eight through eleven tell about how they adjusted their attitude. In chapter nine, Saul is confronted about his attitude toward his fellow Jews who are followers of an itinerant rabbi who was executed by the Romans for sedition. In chapters ten and eleven, Peter is confronted by God about his attitude toward members of the occupying forces that controlled Palestine. In chapter eight, we learn that the early leaders of the church learned to reach out to the heathens in Samaria.

It's odd, but we seem to have more difficulty getting along with people that are close to us with whom we have small differences - than we do with people who are more distant in some way and with whom we have greater differences. The person at work who is Asian and worships at a Shinto shrine doesn't bother us as much as the sister-in-law who belongs to a different denomination or political party.

Times haven't changed much. Both the Samaritans and the Jews worshipped God and were bound by the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses. But the family tree of the Samaritans included non-Jews, they worshipped at a different holy site, and their scriptures didn't include the prophets. The attitude of Jews toward Samaritans was just as bad as the disdain that the early settlers had for Indians in the West, the South had for the slaves, and that Eastern Europeans have for Gypsies. So, it's a very significant move when Philip left Jerusalem and carried the good news of Jesus to those despised Samaritans. In today's lesson we learn that when the apostles in Jerusalem heard about this, they reacted positively. One time, back during Jesus' ministry, the people in a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus. John was one of the disciples who asked Jesus, "Do you want us to call down fire from heaven on these Samaritans?" (Luke 9:52-54) Now, John, along with Peter went to Samaria. There, they prayed that their new Samaritan brothers and sisters would be blessed with the Holy Spirit, just like they had been!

At many times down through the ages the church has gotten sidetracked by this story. Too much time and ink has been spent worrying about when this "baptism by the Holy Spirit" is supposed to happen. This story indicates that water baptism can be before and independent from baptism of the Holy Spirit. Acts 10:44-48 says that Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit first and then Peter baptized them with water. In Acts chapter nineteen, there's a story about Paul in the city of Ephesus in which it appears that baptism by water and the Holy Spirit occurred simultaneously. Despite these examples of various sequences, sometimes the church has gotten all tangled up in worrying about which sequence is supposedly the correct one. Of course, there was a time when we argued about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin.

The few verses from Acts that Cathy read a few minutes ago are set in the midst of a larger story. It's a shame that the lectionary plucks these few verses out of their context. Let's try to set that aright. Sometime earlier, as the church grew, seven people were selected to serve in a ministry of food distribution to the poor and unemployed. These were the first deacons in the church. One was named Stephen and as the high priest and the Jerusalem Council became more and more opposed to the Jews who were followers of Jesus, Stephen was brought before the Council and condemned to death. The persecution of the followers of Jesus was intense and many of them left Jerusalem to escape a fate like Stephen's. Another of the seven deacons was Philip and he went north into Samaria. There he preached the good news of God's kingdom and the people were very receptive. Among those who heard Philip was a magician, a sorcerer named Simon. He was very popular and respected in that region and we're told that he claimed to be a great person. Simon came to believe in the name of Jesus and along with many others, was baptized, and became one of Philip's supporters.

At this point, we come to today's reading and learn that Peter and James came up from Jerusalem and prayed for the new Samaritan disciples to be blessed by the Holy Spirit. They laid hands on them and indeed the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. All of this is well and good, so far. Simon was a magician, a sorcerer. When he saw all of this, he naturally thought in terms of trickery, sleight of hand, and making a living by so doing. He perceived – he assumed – that the Spirit was given through the laying on of hands and he asked to purchase this ability. Obviously, he could make a lot of money dispensing the Holy Spirit.

Peter just exploded! Many translators have softened Peter's reaction, but a highly accurate translation would be "To hell with you and your money for attempting to buy what is God's gift to give!" The Common English Bible continues, ". . . change your heart and life! Turn from your wickedness! Plead with the Lord in the hope that your wicked intent can be forgiven,<sup>23</sup> for I see that your bitterness has poisoned you and evil has you in chains."

(Acts 8:22-23 CEB) Then Simon pleaded with them to pray for him that he might be forgiven. You might say that Peter scared the hell out of him!

There are so many lessons to be learned in this story. Simon's perception was all warped and mistaken. Simon sought the authority that he thought Peter and John had. He sought to have power

over others rather than to serve others. He was used to fame and admiration. He thought of himself as a great person, and saw this as a tool whereby he could be even greater.

He sought to buy this power. It would be a fabulous investment. There's no telling how much money he could make by selling his ability to cure and heal and relieve suffering, all for a fee, of course. The church eventually named a sin after Simon. Just as Simon attempted to buy a position of power within the church, there was a time when the church sold the position of bishop as well as lower levels of authority to those who could afford to make large offerings to the coffers of the church. The practice was called simony and it is a black mark on the history of Christianity.

It lives on today in the so-called ministry of many an electronic evangelist who sells prayer cloths, books, Bibles, and inspirational CDs with the promise that the purchase will cause God to bless you! They prey on those who are weak, desperate, or unacquainted with God. And their faith is corrupted into a commercial transaction!

Simon thought that the Holy Spirit was dispensed somehow through the action of laying hands on someone, that there was some sort of magical and controllable transfer that took place. Peter and John knew better. They had prayed that the new disciples would receive the Holy Spirit. They had no control over this. Jesus told Nicodemus that the Spirit was like the wind, blowing wherever it wanted to. It was God's gift to give, whenever and however God chose. Because it is a gift, it's not a transaction.

Sometimes we can slip into thinking a bit like Simon. We think that the more we give to the church, the more God will bless us. So we try to buy God's favor and blessings for our personal benefit. We slip into thinking that we can influence God. Said more clearly, we think we can manipulate God with our money. And our faith degenerates and becomes corrupted. Instead of recognizing our blessings that God has so generously given to us and reacting with gratitude and generosity, we try to flip the relationship. We give, expecting God to be grateful and to bless us out of gratitude for our giving. We need to ask ourselves, "Are we motivated by our blessings to give – or do we give thinking it will motivate God to bless? It's an important distinction! The Doxology puts us on the right path. Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Amen!

Sisters and Brothers,

We cannot choose when or how the Spirit will move us.

God's Spirit is a gift. We cannot buy it. We dare not try to sell it.

Seek not authority, but service.

Accept all of God's blessings, including the Holy Spirit, with deep thanks.

Respond with by giving and serving generously.